Some Difficulties for Amos Yong’s Disability Theology of the Resurrection
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Abstract

Amos Yong’s *Theology and Down Syndrome* attempts to offer a fresh look at Christian doctrine in light of the disability perspective. Yong’s work offers many useful insights that Christian theologians should consider. One of his more provocative claims is that persons with disabilities like Down Syndrome will retain their disability at the resurrection. In order to support this claim Yong affirms Stanley Hauerwas’ dictum that “eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject.” This appears to make the individual identical to her disability which has several bizarre entailments and difficulties. I wish to bring out three. 1) It would mean that anyone who gets rid of a disability is destroying the person who is disabled. Surgeons would need to change the way they practice medicine and theologians will need to figure out if Jesus is a healer or a murderer. 2) It leaves open the possibility for severe pain in the new heaven and new earth for a person’s disability could be the source of great physical pain and God cannot get rid of the disability without eliminating the person. 3) A set of similar questions will arise. For instance, “An adult gets into a car accident and is left physically and mentally disabled. At the resurrection will he retain his disability or will he be restored to his pre-disabled state?”

I. Amos Yong’s Disability Theology of the Resurrection

Disability theology is a project in postmodernism in that a key component is the notion that all voices have an equal say on all matters. Part of the project entails pointing out the past atrocities perpetrated on a particular group and then using the oppressed perspective to criticize and correct the views of reality that led to the atrocities. The project for disability theology, then, is to lay out the history of disability, offer a critique of the doctrinal articulations in Christianity that may have led to oppression, and rearticulate Christian doctrine from the perspective of the disability experience. The history of the treatment of persons with disabilities contains far too many tragedies, so it would seem that disability theologians like Amos Yong have their work cut out for them.

There are several doctrinal concepts in Christian theology that Yong sees as problematic and in need of being rearticulated from a disability perspective. The doctrine that I wish to focus on here is the general resurrection of the dead. As Yong points out, our eschatology is intertwined with our Christian practices. The way we think about the final eschatological state will deeply influence the way the Church behaves. The problem, as Yong sees it, is that our image of our future resurrected bodies is based on “some able-bodied ideal of perfection.”

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2 Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: reimagining Disability in Late Modenity* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007), 291.
3 *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 282.
If we think that the afterlife is a ‘magical’ fix for all the challenges posed by disability, then we may be more inclined to simply encourage people with disabilities (as has long been done) to bear up under their lot in life and await God’s eschatological healing for their lives. Yet this assumes that the task of responding to the issues of disability belongs to God, and it also assumes that disability is primarily (perhaps only) an individual affair.⁴

The corrective for this problem is to posit that persons with disabilities will retain their disabilities at the resurrection. People with Down Syndrome, for instance, will still have trisomy 21. Redemption for people with Down Syndrome will “not consist in some magical fix of the twenty-first chromosome but in the recognition of their central roles both in the communion of saints and in the divine scheme of things.”⁵ Yong further speculates that the same will be true for all persons—from the young to the elderly—along with their differing bodily afflictions and conditions, whether that be the wide range of intellectual or developmental disabilities, Alzheimer’s, chronic illness, polio, multiple sclerosis, Lou Gehrig’s disease, congenital amputees, and so on. Precisely because the meanings of our lives are constituted by but irreducible to our bodies, so also will the resurrected body be the site through which the meaning of our narratives are transformed (and that, eternally).⁶

At this point one might ask how Yong could maintain this account of the resurrection given the emphasis on healing in scripture in the ministry of Christ and the eschaton. Yong offers a hermeneutical solution as a way forward. It starts by distinguishing between illness and disability. Illnesses can be improved while disabilities cannot. When it comes to interpreting scripture we should distinguish between healing and curing. Illnesses can be healed, but disabilities cannot be cured. Thus, one should read the ministry of Jesus as healing illnesses but not curing disabilities.⁷

This might strike one as a rather arbitrary distinction and thus call into question Yong’s proposed hermeneutical principle. What could justify such a distinction between illness and disability, and healing and curing? Why can illnesses be healed, but disabilities not be cured? The justification seems to come from Stanley Hauerwas’ dictum: “To eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject.”⁸ The claim is that God cannot cure “individuals of their genetic variation, as it is difficult to imagine how someone with trisomy-21 (for example) can be the same person without that chromosomal configuration. In these cases, for God not to allow the

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⁴ Yong, “Disability and the Love of Wisdom,” 70
⁵ Theology and Down Syndrome, 282. On 269 he states, “To say that people with disabilities (such as Eiesland or Wendell) will no longer be disabled in heaven threatens the continuity between their present identities and that of their resurrected bodies.” Nancy Eiesland has degenerative bone disease, and Susan Wendell has myalgic encephalomyelitis. This is an odd claim since Yong, on occasion, speaks as if physical disabilities can be cured while intellectual disabilities cannot, 334.
⁶ Ibid., 283
⁷ Ibid., 245-6.
trisomic mutation may be for God not to allow the appearance of precisely that person. There may be no way, in this case, to eradicate the disability without eliminating the person."

Why think a thing like that? Yong claims that some disabilities are identity conferring. Our sense of self is deeply shaped by our past experiences, and disabilities play a major role in the shaping of our personalities and character. "[L]iving with disabilities shapes our lives, relationships, and identities in substantive rather than incidental ways…To say that people with disabilities [like degenerative bone disease and myalgic encephalomyelitis] will no longer be disabled in heaven threatens the continuity between their present identities and that of their resurrected bodies." This leads Yong to ask, “if people with Down Syndrome are resurrected without it, in what sense can we say that it is they who are resurrected and embraced by their loved ones?” Or to put it another way, “Could someone imagine their daughter with Down’s syndrome as being her true self in the new heaven and new earth without some manifestation of her condition?”

My answer to such questions is that I can imagine, perhaps as through a mirror dimly, my sister Kelli without Down Syndrome. This is because she is not identical to her disability. She has various character traits that are shaped by her Down Syndrome, but they are not causally determined by her Down Syndrome. For instance, she often fails to answer questions directly and has the skills of subterfuge that would make a politician jealous. These qualities are not the direct causal result of her disability as far as I can tell for my wife is often irritated at my inability to answer questions directly, and subterfuge runs in the family. It is true, though, that her disability has shaped her personality, but why think that she would need to be continually disabled in order to retain that personality? It is not obvious that eliminating a person’s disability will eliminate the character and sense of self that she has developed over time because of her disability. In fact, it is conceivable that a person could retain her cultivated character whilst leaving behind her disability.

It seems to me that Yong has a case of mistaken identity. By this I mean that he has confused metaphysical identity with a sense of self. Further, he has confused the “is” of predication with the “is” of identity. Necessarily a person is identical to herself. Necessarily a disability is something a person has and not something a person is. A disability is an accidental, and not a necessary, property. A disability is not a necessary property of an individual essence precisely because it is a part of a contingent state of affairs. As such, Hauerwas’ dictum is false, and Yong’s hermeneutical principle lacks justification. Since Yong’s hermeneutical principle lacks justification, his rearticulation of the resurrection from a disability perspective is unmotivated.

However, I have my suspicions that disability theologians will not find metaphysical arguments convincing and will continue to hold Hauerwas’ dictum. As such, I wish to bring out three sets of difficulties that arise from Hauerwas’ dictum if it is taken seriously. The following

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9 “Disability and the Love of Wisdom,” 61. Despite the strong statements from Yong that I have already quoted, there is a severe ambiguity in his writings. Sometimes he talks as if God cannot eliminate/cure disabilities, then other times he says God can and on occasion does, and other times he says God could cure but will not because disabilities do not need to be cured. See Theology and Down Syndrome, 243, 245-8, 269-74, 282-4. If God can cure disabilities—whether He chooses to or not—it follows that Hauerwas’ dictum is false.

10 Yong asked that I include the word “some” in this sentence. It is hard to figure out which disabilities are identity conferring and which are not from Yong’s writings. Again, there is a great deal of ambiguity.


12 Theology and Down Syndrome, 269. Also, see footnote 5 above.

13 Ibid., 270.
difficulties are entailed by Hauerwas’ dictum. If a disability theologian like Yong wishes to avoid these entailments he will need to abandon the dictum and replace it with something clear and coherent.

II. First Difficulty: Medical Ethics and the Ministry of Jesus

Yong holds that a disability is “any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.” If Hauerwas’ dictum that to “eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject” is taken seriously it will have a profound impact on how we practice medicine. Surgeons ought not to do cochlear implants anymore for in the process they are eliminating the disability of deafness and as such eliminating a person. Every cochlea implant is a murder. Also, various fields of medical research ought not to be pursued for fear of eliminating even more people. For instance, we should stop trying to find cures for Alzheimer’s, Autism, and MS. We should also stop working on limb transplants and cures for blindness. Recent questions have arisen about the possibility of drugs that increase mental IQ. It would seem that we ought not give such drugs to persons with mental impairments for we would be eliminating those individuals in the process. Nor should we continue to work on drugs that reduce the affects of Alzheimer’s, or drug treatments for ADHD.

Related to this, we will need to rethink our views of Jesus. Jesus developed a reputation as a healer. Typically one might look at the gospels and say along with J.B. Green that “[h]ealing is a sign of the in breaking kingdom of God, reminding the reader that behind the healing ministry of Jesus and others stands Yahweh the healer.” Not so if we take Hauerwas’ dictum seriously. The gospels portray Jesus has healing illnesses and curing disabilities. People born blind are made to see and the lame are made to walk (cf. John 9, Mark 2). The deaf are made to hear (Mark 7). Jesus is eliminating people left and right in the gospels. If we take Hauerwas’ dictum seriously it would seem to call into question the moral character of Jesus and make one skeptical if Yahweh is in fact standing behind Jesus.

There is a possible rejoinder to this set of difficulties. One could say that physical disabilities can be cured but mental disabilities cannot. The problem with this rejoinder is that it lacks justification. One would need a sufficient reason for thinking that mental disabilities cannot be cured. To say that one’s mental disability has deeply influenced one’s sense of self is insufficient for the same applies to physical disabilities that are curable. The same also applies to cancer survivors who speak of the life changing experiences they have had as they overcame their disease.

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14 “Disability and the Love of Wisdom,” 56.
15 One could accuse me of an uncharitable reading of Yong. I must confess that I do not know what else could be meant by Hauerwas’ dictum. If it has some other meaning besides the elimination of the person, it is not obvious. If it has some other meaning, the dictum should be abandoned.
17 Theology and Down Syndrome, 334. Yong says that intellectual disabilities, unlike physical disabilities, serve as “strong identity characteristic[s] that cannot be eliminated without eliminating the person.” Of course, as noted in footnotes 5, 9, and 12, this creates a severe ambiguity in Yong’s work for he sometimes speaks as if physical disabilities cannot be cured either.
III. Second Difficulty: The Problem of Heavenly Pain

Consider the following. Let us say there is a disability attached to the 17th chromosome that causes continual pain. The disorder is the source of the pain, and the pain is terribly debilitating. In order to get rid of the pain one would have to remove the disorder that is attached to the 17th chromosome. If, by Hauerwas’ criterion, God cannot get rid of the disorder without getting rid of the person, then God cannot get rid of the pain. If God cannot get rid of the disorder, the person is destined to an eternal life of pain. Granted it is a heavenly life of pain, but it is still a life of continual pain.18 Whence then is the hope of a world without suffering?

It would seem that God is impotent to deal with the problem of evil even after creation has been made new. The problem is further exacerbated by the disability theologian’s claim that one’s “personal identity is understood not only in terms of cognitive self-consciousness, but…in terms of bodily structures”19 because a person’s experience of a life-long debilitating pain as a result of her bodily structure will constitute part of her identity. If one has to seriously ask, “Will people who have lived most of their lives with prostheses be resurrected with what has become, for all intents and purposes, an integral aspect of their identity?”20 it would seem that we would have to seriously ask, “Will someone with a life-long debilitating pain that has become an integral aspect of her identity be resurrected without this pain?” It seems that persons who suffer from MS, leg calf perthes, horrible back pain, fibromyalgia, and other such woes will have an eternity of pain to look forward to regardless of their eternal destination. It would also follow that persons who suffer psychological anguish from chronic depression, multiple personality disorders, and other such mental disabilities have a similar fate.21

IV. Third Difficulty: People Disabled Late in Life

Much like the previous difficulty, a set of questions that arise from Hauerwas’ dictum seems to have disheartening answers. Consider the case of a fully grown man who gets in a car accident. As a result of the accident he is left severely disabled both intellectually and physically. When Christ returns and ushers in the resurrection of the dead how will this man be resurrected?22 Will he be resurrected in his pre-accident state, or his post-accident state? It would seem that the answer is post-accident for God cannot eliminate the man’s disabilities without eliminating the man himself. I doubt very much that the man’s wife will appreciate this answer, nor would the man were he capable of grasping what was being said. Or consider a classic question posed during the early Church. If a man loses his arm in life will God give him a new one at the resurrection? An Augustinian would say yes, but it would seem that a disability theologian must say no for in “the new created order, every life, ‘impaired’ in its own way, will grow in goodness, knowledge, and love.”23 To say that this diminishes an individual’s hope for

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18 Thanks to Keith Yandell for this argument.
20 Ibid., 68.
21 Thanks to Justin Knapp for bringing to my attention the issue of chronic depression and bipolar disorder.
22 Thanks to Ben Simpson for bringing this question to my attention.
23 Theology and Down Syndrome, 288.
the afterlife would be an understatement. Further, it ignores all of the disabled voices that do look forward to God’s future curing of their bodies.  

V. Concluding Remarks

Towards the end of Yong’s book he makes it clear that there are many issues that need to be worked out from a disability perspective and he laments that he has had to be suggestive in his thoughts instead of dealing with the various issues involved in reformulating Christian doctrine. While Yong should be applauded for attempting to reformulate Christian thought and practice in a way that emphasizes the inherent value of persons with disabilities, I suggest that his reformulations need more work so that they can deal with the difficulties that I have raised. In particular, he should get rid of Hauerwas’ dictum and abandon the claim that disabilities must be retained in order to preserve identity and continuity. Despite this, I agree with Yong that Christian thought and practice need to be reformulated precisely because persons with disabilities do have inherent value, and the hope of Christ is for everyone whether they are abled or disabled.

24 Yong notes that amongst persons with disabilities there are many divergent views on heavenly hope. After mentioning several disabled persons who look forward to God’s healing power, Yong makes the most astounding remark. “To be sure, disability advocates may say these are socially conditioned responses of the psychologically and religiously immature.” Theology and Down Syndrome, 244. Hopefully Yong does not agree with these advocates.

25 I would like to thank the following people for help on earlier versions of this paper. Justin Buttellman, Kendra Garchow, Justin Knapp, Nate and Julie LeMahieu, Elizabeth Mullins, Ben and Moriah Simpson, Nick Wackerhagen, Keith Yandell, and Amos Yong.